DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 446 HE 024 508

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TITLE Impact of Older Students on Higher Education in the United States: 1945-1985.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Admission Criteria; *Adult Students; College Admission; College Programs; Colleges; Enrollment Trends; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; Student College Relationship; *Student Needs; *Student Personnel Services; Student Recruitment; Universities

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that colleges and universities recruit older students (age 25 and older) but are not responsive to them and their needs, which are different from those of traditional-aged students. Trends in enrollment of older students in higher education are noted, beginning in 1946 with the return of World War II veterans and the passage of the G.I. Bill. The paper also discusses: higher education's efforts to deal with the shrinking supply of 18- to 22-year-olds by finding new ways to increase or at least stabilize enrollments, using a corporate approach to direct their activities; adults' reasons for entering higher education; barriers encountered by adult students; and inappropriateness of some college programs and policies. Recommendations are offered for developing services for older students, such as creating an entry education center, an adult learner support center, and flexible course arrangements. The paper concludes that returning adult students should find caring, committed staff to help them through admissions, help them remain committed, and help them find what they want after they graduate. (Includes 18 references) (LPT)

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# IMPACT OF OLDER STUDENTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: 1945-1985

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Impact of Older Students on Higher Education in the United States: 1945-1985

Older students are an increasing presence in institutions of higher education in the United States. While older students on campus are not a new phenomenon, their being on campus is of more importance in recent years because of the decline in the number of traditional-aged college students, that is those students aged 18-22 years.

This paper will discuss trends in the enrollment of older students in higher education and the impact of their numbers. The discussion will begin in 1946 with the return of World War II veterans, courtesy of the Veterans Readjustment Act, better known as the GI. Bill. I will discuss education in the corporate image and how it relates to older students. I will note reasons for older students' return to higher education, and some of the barriers they may face. I will conclude with some recommendations on how to make their return easier.

For the purpose of this paper, older students are defined as those age 25 or older.

Numbers

Table 1 shows the number of older students in higher education. It is interesting to note that the number of students over age 24 was not published before 1982. In the years prior to 1982, the number of college students aged 18-22 was given as a proportion of all 18-22 year olds in the country. In 1982 older students earned a footnote to the

table of 18-22 year old students. It wasn't until 1987 that the number of students over age 35 was reported. In 1987 the number of students age 35 and over was reported starting in 1970. That is to say, the numbers had been collected, but hadn't been deemed important enough to publish.

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Table 1. Number of older students at institutions of higher education: 1970-1990[1] (in thousands)

| | fall 1970 | fall 1975 | fall 1980 | fall 1985 | fall 1990 (projected) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| total enrollment | 8581 | 11,185 | 12,097 | 12,247 | 13,213 |
| age 25-29 | 1074 | 1774 | 1871 | 1953 | 1901 |
| age 30-34 | 487 | 967 | 1243 | 1261 | 1360 |
| age 35+ | 823 | 1383 | 1422 | 1885 | 2227 |

[1]All numbers taken from Digest of Educational Statistics published between 1968 and 1989.

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The GI Bill

After World War II, the GI Bill made it possible for returning veterans to further their education. Table 2 shows the number of veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill's educational assistance for those in institutions of higher education.

Table 2. Number of Veterans Using the GI Bill at Institutions of Higher Learning: 1945-1980[1]

| | 1945 | 1946 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Veterans | 76,802 | 1,572,049 | 580,597 | 171,720 | 590,000 | 1,693,000 | 842,000 |

[1]All numbers taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstracts of the United States from the years 1946-1990.

The GI Bill was not just a nice gesture on the part of the federal government toward the returning veterans. Those who framed the Bill had feared the impact on the economy of the hundreds of thousands of veterans returning from overseas after World War II (Olson, 1973). For a country just barely out of the devastating Depression of the 1930s, the thought of unemployed soldiers in the country was not a comforting one. There were those who foresaw returning veterans standing in bread lines or selling apples on the street. They wanted the "efficiency and valor of the [soldiers to] be directed into the proper channels" (Olson, 1973:599). If this were not the case "disaster and chaos [were] inevitable" (Olson, 1973:599). The framers feared unrest on the part of an unemployed veteran group that would lead to an overthrow of the American way of life; as Olson put it, the veterans were seen as a force that could "make our country or break it" (Olson, 1973:598).

Therefore, in order to forestall the veterans' return to the workplace, part of the GI Bill benefits subsidized the veterans' education.

The impact of the GI Bill went far beyond what had originally been envisioned. The GI Bill opened the door to higher education for many who otherwise might not have been able to afford it. It "gave access to heretofore unwelcoming universities and degree programs leading to professional careers and away from blue-collar constraints" (Hyman, 1986:67). This, in turn, opened the door to their children, who came to believe that a college education was their right. What Hyman called the "culture of aspiration" (Hyman, 1986:69) was expanding to include those who, before the GI Bill, wouldn't have even dreamed of going to college. Parents want their children to do as well if not better than they did. If the parent(s) had gone to college, the children should go, too. Higher education was no longer just for the few who could afford it.

Because of the education it made available, the GI Bill expanded the career opportunities for the veteran. Not only did it make the previously-unattainable college education within reach, it also "made reasonable the pursuit of careers that, before the war, were unrealistic, even if perceived" (Hyman, 1986:70).

The GI Bill also changed the nature of college professors. Hyman says the recipients of the GI Bill who went on to get doctorates were the ones who participated in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. He finds it "difficult even to imagine a pre-World War II participation by academics ... in ... demands of the 1960s

for race equality" (Hyman, 1986:69).

There are others (for example, Nam, 1964) who say that the GI Bill was a response to a growing demand for education, not the instigator of more people's going to college. Nam contends that the World War II veteran was better educated than the nonveteran before he entered the service, and it should therefore be no surprise that so many veterans went to college after their discharge. He says "a high proportion probably would have attended college after service even without the advantage of the GI Bill" (Nam, 1964:28).

Nam also cites the peripheral effects of the GI Bill, what he calls the "less tangible" effects of the Bill (Nam, 1964:32). He says there were changes made in the organization and curricula of higher education in response to the presence of the veterans on campus. He, too, cites changes in the "educational orientations" of the children of the veterans (Nam, 1964:32). The children saw how their parents valued education, so they saw it as important, too.

Older Students on Campus and Education in the Corporate Image

The pool of older students is increasing due to the aging of the Baby Boomers. With the shrinking supply of 18-22 year olds for higher education, institutions are seeking new ways to increase enrollments, or merely keep them stable. One way to accomplish this would be to increase the percentage of 18-22 year olds who continue their education.

Another way is to expand the pool from which students are drawn, that is, "target" and recruit the older student using some of the same tactics that business uses for its marketing strategies.

Burkett sees advantages to broadening the base of enrollment in higher education by shifting resources "to its growing edge and new majority (its adult part-time student body)" (Burkett, 1977:261). Burkett says that if institutions are to grow, programs must be marketed for a growing adult part-time student body (Burkett, 1977.

Institutions must compete for enrollments of students of any age and the tuition money they bring in (Best, 1988). Long calls it "education in the corporate image" (Long, 1987:53). Higher education is now using the corporate approach to resolve educational issues and to direct its activities. Its activities are directed by an increasingly bureaucratic system, more characteristic of business than higher education (Best, 1988). Decisions are made according to what is best for the organization. In the case of higher education, the "best for the organization" is stable enrollments. If the number of students doesn't fluctuate too widely, administrators can better plan the number of classes to be offered, number of faculty or other personnel needed to teach the classes, number of dorm rooms needed, etc.

Higher education has been organized to meet the needs of the institution, and secondarily to meet the needs of the individual. Older students are recruited, but then left on their own. To the university, a student is a student is a student, whether he/she is 18, 28 or 38. People are not people with individual needs that should be addressed, but resources to be used in the best way possible to achieve the institution's goals.

Other evidence of how higher education is guided by corporate strategies is provided by Hu (1985). His language is that of business. He says colleges need to understand "the needs of the marketplace" in order to have an "effective marketing program" (Hu, 1985:201). He talks of designing programs and "promotional strategies" (Hu, 1985:208) to encourage nontraditional students to enter higher education. He laments the lack of comprehensive marketing packages at most colleges.

Using corporate strategies to recruit older students may be all well and good. Many older students need to know what is available if they are considering entering or returning to higher education. But in some cases what is good for the institution (that is, steady enrollments) may not be good for the student. Older students have needs that are different from those of traditional-age students, and these need to be addressed once the older student has been admitted. It is not enough to recruit the older student, or as Hu would say, target the older student market. Colleges

need to follow-up on the older student and give them the help they may need, whether that is counselors sensitive to the demands the older student faces, or financial aid forms that don't ask for parents' income.

Reasons for Returning

Clark says traditional-age college students are interested in a college education for what it can do for them in the future. Adult learners, on the other hand, want to improve their present lives (Clark, 1989)

Adults' reasons for entering higher education have been put into three categories: socialization (to meet new people), personal interest in something, or a desire to improve their position in the job market. For those students pursuing a degree, the overriding reason is to improve their chances in the job market (Long, 1987). They want to upgrade and update their occupational skills, or to learn entirely new ones (Iovacchini, Hall and Hengstler, 1985). If an adult has previously had one year of college, he/she is seven times as likely to be enrolled in a degree-credit program than someone with only a high school diploma (Bishop and Van Dyk, 1977).

Education is valued because it can be useful in a work setting. The student needs to get the certificate (credential) to "certify educational activity" (Long, 1987:30). They must have the piece of paper as evidence of achievement. Employers no longer see employees' experience as adequate qualification for the job; the employees have to

have evidence that they know enough for the job. Because of the increasing need for credentials, higher education for adults is only marginally voluntary. Those who get ahead are those with a degree in hand.

Technological advances require more education. For example, as computer use becomes more and more widespread, industry needs people with training in computer development (whether hardware or software) in order to stay competitive. Long (1987) says education of adults is driven by corporate and national economic manpower policies. When industry needed more computer people, higher education started offering degrees in computer science. I'm not sure which is driving which, that is, whether the universities offered the courses first and then the industry blossomed, or vice versa.

Puryear and McDaniels (1990) see higher education as a "bridge" to reaching new personal or career goals.

Iovacchini et al. (1985) report the reason most often given for entering higher education was to become a better educated person, followed closely by wanting a higher level occupation and an increase in earning power.

Mohney and Anderson (1988) address the reasons behind women's entering higher education. They say that women's entry is affected by their life events. That is, their entry timing is determined by the demands in their lives, for example, family or work responsibilities. Women go to college when their going won't adversely affect those around

them. Therefore, women often go when the children are "old enough" (whether that means three months, three years or thirteen years), and their family responsibilities are lessened.

Mohney and Anderson (1988) say counselors need to be aware of the many demands on women students. While the motivation and ability may be present, the pressures of work and/or family may, in their words, "inhibit achievement" (Mohney and Anderson, 1988:273).

Barriers Adult Students May Encounter

Barriers to an older person's going to college can be as amorphous as thinking there's "not enough time" in one's life, or as concrete as the labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures necessary to get admitted and signed up for classes.

Often the first barrier most adults face when they decide to further their education is not knowing where to go for information about what they need to do in order to get admitted, or about programs that are offered (Peterson and Associates, 1979).

The admissions procedures usually are not geared toward the older student. High school transcripts and SAT scores are requested; financial aid forms require information about parents' income and resources. These are inappropriate for the older student. Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) suggest evaluating the application in light of recent job performance or community participation.

Burkett (1977) seconds this. He says that because of their leaning toward the just-graduated high school student, the admission procedures fail to take into account the prospective adult student's many years of "noninstitutional living and learning" (Burkett, 1977:268). He also says the one-size-fits-all admission procedures are not accurate predictors of to the success or failure of adult part-time students (Burkett, 1977).

Byrne (1989) cites lack of a chance for socialization as a barrier to adults' achieving all they can. As part-time students they aren't part of an identifiable cohort, such as a freshman class, and therefore feel isolated. Older students are swayed by forces outside the institution that the traditional-age student usually doesn't have to deal with, such as a full-time job in addition to classes. Byrne also says the role of student for an adult is not particularly valued in our society. The older student should be doing something useful with his/her time instead of going to college.

Barriers have been classified as situational, institutional or dispositional (Peterson and Associates, 1979). Situational barriers have to do with barriers arising from a student's situation in life, e.g., the cost of higher education, or the simultaneous pull of family, work and classes.

Dispositional barriers are those that have to do with attitudes and self-perceptions of the adult learner, for

example, poor study skills, low self-esteem, lack of confidence or feeling "too old" to learn.

Institutional barriers are those arising from college policies that discourage adult students from attending. This could include the availability of classes only at times inconvenient to adult learners (that is, only during the day) or having to pay full-time fees for part-time study.

Burkett cites several institutional practices that may stand in the way of the adult learner. He notes inflexible scheduling of classes meeting at times inaccessible to the adult learner, as well as inflexible and time-consuming registration procedures, "lockstep" course arrangements, and "inflexible adherence to prerequisites unrelated to learning objectives or the ability of the adult part-time student to complete the course" (Burkett, 1977:268).

Bishop and Van Dyk (1977) comment on the way colleges often make part-time students pay more per course than the full-time student. They recommend redesigning tuition charges to equalize per course fees between part-time and full-time students.

Programs and Policies for the Older Student

Clark (1989) says only about ten percent of colleges welcoming adult students have special orientation programs to serve adults. As was noted previously, to colleges a student is a student is a student. They are aware older

students are there but may not be responsive to them and their needs.

Puryear and McDaniels (1990) report policies that institutions have established for nontraditional students. They found that the most common policy was accepting a GED in place of a high school diploma (81 percent of the polled institutions had this policy). They also found the 62 percent would waive ACT or SAT scores for nontraditional students, and about half (51 percent) provided counselors/academic advisers.

Puryear and McDaniels (1990) also report programs and services available for the nontraditional student. Eighty-seven percent of the institutions polled offered night classes. A center/office was available at 59 percent of the institutions.

What is telling in this study was that staff was not designated to work specifically with the nontraditional student. Older students enter higher education with varying needs. Unlike the traditional-age student, older students often are trying to juggle family and job responsibilities as well as attend classes. They must also deal with the anxiety and insecurity of returning to the classroom after being out of a school setting for so many years. In a best-case scenario, nontraditional students would work closely with a staff member who was trained in working with the older student. Schlossberg et al. (1989)

go into great detail as to services and programs that would best help the older student.

Recommendations

Schlossberg et al. (1989) see three phases in an adult student's educational career: moving in, moving through and moving on.

Moving in refers to what the adult student must do before entering higher education. It culminates with filling out an application. Moving through refers to the progression of the student through the academic courses. Moving on refers to the student's completing his/her formal schooling and leaving the college/university.

Schlossberg et al. (1989) outline programs and policies that would help the older student in all three phases of his/her college career. For the moving in phase, they recommend an entry education center. Since many adult learners are uncertain if they can handle college, aren't sure what they want to do, or are intimidated by the bureaucracy of the admission procedure, an entry education center "would house recruitment, preadmission counseling, admissions, orientation, financial aid and planning, student employment, educational planning, academic advising, developmental assistance, assessment of prior learning and registration staff" (Schlossberg et al., 1989:66). Instead of all these functions being dispersed around the campus, they would all be in one place. It would help the student transform a general interest in education into the practical

information needed to return to school.

Once the admission process has been completed, the older student then moves through. To help the older student through, they recommend an "adult learner support center" so that the adult learning doesn't feel so isolated. They also suggest mentors for the older student. The mentor would help with academic advising as well as provide support and encouragement to the student through his/her academic career. These mentors would be trained to work specifically with older students.

Others also have suggestions to help the older student move through. To combat the barrier noted previously of inflexible course arrangements, Hodgkinson (1976) offers his ideas. He says if higher education wants to attract older students, it should move away from the "cafeteria-line," linear curricula and move toward a "scramble" system. In the current curricula, a student picks up what he/she needs when it is in front of him/her or be pushed along. The student is out of luck if he/she wants something that's already been passed by. For college courses, students must pick up the introductory courses (the "entree" in the cafeteria analogy) before they enroll in the higher divisions (the "dessert"). To help colleges attract older students, Hodgkinson would allow students to take higher level courses provided they have proved they know the material of the lower level course even if they haven't taken it (Hodgkinson, 1976).

Schlossberg et al. (1989) also suggest that institutions take into consideration the fact that many older students cannot complete their coursework in four years, and have some process to allow students to sit out a year or two and return if outside responsibilities make it impossible for the student to continue.

The older student has now made his/her way through the system and is ready to graduate. What can best help the older student move on? Schlossberg et al. recommend transition groups "to bridge the gap between the institution and the outside world" (Schlossberg et al., 1989:184). These groups explore what the adult student can expect now that he/she is graduating. They can be for those considering graduate school as well as a career.

Conclusion

When the first wave of older students hit U.S. campuses after World War II, colleges and universities were unprepared for the large numbers of veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill's education benefits. Housing was scarce. Classes were crowded. But by most accounts, the veterans coped with the situations, got their degree, and went on.

Today's older student faces the same challenge the veteran did: get a degree and move on. But now people are calling for special programs and services to help the older student cope.

The recommendations for special services or centers for older students is commendable, but the sad fact is that there is usually not enough money to go around, even for all the younger students need. If programs for older students were initiated, it might mean something for the traditional-age student would be reduced. And although the number of older students on campus is increasing, they still constitute only a small percentage of the student population. The money goes where the numbers are.

It would be nice if returning adult students could find caring, committed staff to help them through admissions, help them remain committed and help them find what they want once they graduate. But I'm not sure that even traditional age students get that kind of service. What is recommended for the older student would be beneficial to the younger student as well. The younger students may be better equipped to deal with admissions and financial aid forms since they're more used to educational bureaucracy, but even the traditional-age students have to make an effort to take advantage of the services higher education has to offer. Counselors don't go knocking on doors to see if they can help. The students must seek out the help they need.

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